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STEPHEN D. COAN
STATE FIRE MARSHAL

MEMORANDUM

To: Heads of Fire Department

From: Stephen D. Coan
State Fire Marshal

Date: April 16, 2015

RE: Addendum - suspected anhydrous ammonia in propane tanks

On April 7, 2015, a Fire Marshal's Advisory was issued regarding hazards posed by 20 pound propane tanks that may have been used to steal ammonia for methamphetamine production. Since that advisory was issued, hazmat teams and bomb squads have responded to numerous incidents and evaluated over 40 tanks WITHOUT any ammonia detected. Due to events and responses in the Commonwealth, an addendum to the April 7, 2015 advisory is being issued at this time.

The following guidelines are provided as an aid to the fire department hazard and risk decision-making process. Fire departments are encouraged to consider both the physical tank and its history in determining the possibility of it being used for illicit drug manufacturing. The following observations and tank history should be considered in combination to determine risk.

Observations:

1. Is the tank valve discoloration blue or green? Discoloration from ammonia is blue, though differentiation of this may be difficult and become a judgment matter.
2. Is the discoloration, in fact, pipe dope applied with a valve change? Note that vendors have used a blue colored pipe doping which may be confusing (see figure 1).



Figure 1: Blue pipe dope -
not a risk

3. Is the tank on the supply side of its cycle (e.g.: Was it purchased or rented in its current condition? Tanks coming from the supply side will not contain ammonia.) Cylinders purchased from commercial vendors do not pose a risk to the owner and cylinders that have been used since purchase or rental do not pose a threat.
4. What is its location? (see rationale above #3)
5. Is there a pungent ammonia smell around cylinder?

History:

Fire Departments should ask these questions of the reporting party. Answers to questions should be considered when determining the hazard risk assessment.

1. Has the cylinder been out of the owner's possession from time of rental/purchase to present?
2. Has it been used for cooking at any time before the discoloration was noted? (If so, it cannot contain ammonia)

Use of ammonia from bulk sources is an older method in creating methamphetamine, thus the likelihood of anhydrous ammonia being used in this way is unlikely.

The Department of Fire Services has established a procedure to deploy a single hazmat technician, upon request, to aid in the evaluation of propane tanks and determination of the need for further response by Hazmat and the Bomb Squad. Any fire department encountering a suspect propane tank may request a technician assistance through the Hazmat Control Centers; 877-385-0822 - #1 for Berkshire Hampden and Hampshire Counties, #2 for all other counties.

Hazmat teams and the bomb squads are working closely to provide rapid and effective screening methods for suspect propane tanks and will respond as requested, supported by the above hazard and risk assessment. If you have any questions, please contact Hazardous Materials Response Director, David Ladd at 978-567-3117 (o) or 339-221-3260 (c).



Figure 2: Ammonia affected Brass Fitting - Consider as a hazard

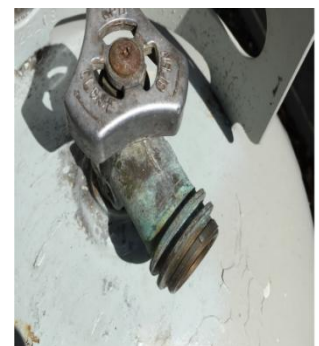


Figure 3: Normal oxidation, no risk